

VIPOO SRIVILASA: CONNECTING THE POTS

Melbourne-based Thai-born artist Vipoo Srivilasa makes intricate, tragicomic ceramics that reflect cross-cultural tenors and socio-ecological concerns.

By Mariam Arcilla

"I find porcelain clay quite sexy to touch," muses Vipoo Srivilasa. "Its texture reminds me of nice, smooth skin." Ceramics was not his first love, though. Peckish cockroaches and an unmanned reception desk led Srivilasa to the practice for which he is now known.

The artist, who's speaking to me via videophone from his Melbourne home, reveals that as a teenager in Thailand his dream was to become a traditional Thai dancer. "Mum took me to a dance school to try and enrol," he recalls. "But when we arrived, the reception area was empty." After waiting for eons, they gave up, walked back outside, and noticed a Fine Arts building across the road. "Someone inside was available to give us information," Srivilasa says. "I took it as a sign and applied."

Pursuing an interest in fashion accessories, he created and sold earrings and necklaces made out of air-dried clay. As it turned out this was a short-lived operation, as customers began complaining about their 'vanishing' jewellery. "One of the ingredients used to mix air-dry clay is bread," he explains. "And cockroaches like to eat *everything!*" His irritation quickly gives way to a revelatory laugh. "Actually, I should thank those cockroaches – they forced me to switch careers."

Srivilasa attended university to train in ceramic design and migrated to Australia in 1997, to hone his skills through a Graduate Diploma in Melbourne, followed by a Masters of Fine Art and Design in Tasmania. "It was after I moved here," he says, "that I began to understand what it was like to make ceramics as an *artist*. And to have an art studio."

Now based in Melbourne, the artist employs porcelain clay, cobalt pigment, glaze and gold luster to produce exquisite figurines, vessels and foodware that are informed by social status, cross-cultural experiences and the human impact on the environment. The works pay stylistic homage to the 18th-century blue-and-white porcelain produced in China and imported into Europe. "[It] parallels my journey from the East to the West," he says.

After growing his exhibition repertoire in Australia, Thailand, Korea, Philippines and the USA, a turning point came in 2008 in the form of the immersive dinner project *Roop-Rote-Ruang (Touch-Taste-Tell)*. Aaron Seeto, back then the Director of 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, provoked a conversation with Srivilasa about exhibiting his pieces in a way that wove together the senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell.

"Ceramics are tactile," Seeto tells me on the phone. "So to have presented Vipoo's works conventionally on a plinth would've undermined what was magical about his work: its narrative, its fine detail. We wanted to engage with people by showing them that ceramic brings the relationship back to the body and the hand."

Srivilasa was an excellent cook, so the duo choreographed a series of intimate seven-course dinner parties in homes around Sydney, giving Srivilasa the leviathan task of playing artist, host, chef and storyteller. Core to the project was a 105-piece set lined with coral-reef themed artwork that gradually unravelled with every swallow and sip of the Thai cuisine Srivilasa had prepared in the kitchen. Between meals, guests were provided with knobs of clay to mould their own bowls, or *pinch pots*. Today Srivilasa recollects the aroma of boiling rice, cutlery clanking on plates and elated guests comparing artful discoveries at the bottom of their bowls. "Their experiences became a constant gesture towards the handmade," he says. "In many ways, these dinners changed the way I saw my practice." Adds Seeto: "Vipoo has an inventive mind, and you can tell that he's incredibly curious about other people. This is why strangers felt generous enough to open their homes and kitchens to him."



VIPOO SRIVILASA
Deity series, 2016
cobalt pigment on
porcelain and gold luster

Photo: Andrew Barcham

Courtesy the artist and
Subhashok Art Centre, Bangkok



Vipoo Srivilasa
Photo: Andrew Barcham



Top to bottom
VIPOO SRIVILASA
Roop-Rote-Ruang / Taste-Touch-Tell, 2005

Photo: 4A Gallery

Installation view
VIPOO SRIVILASA
Red-Eared Slider
Subhashok Art Centre

VIPOO SRIVILASA
Diverse (Fan series for Basil Sellers Art Prize), 2016
cobalt pigment on porcelain
31 x 21 x 10 cm

Photo: Andrew Barcham

Courtesy the artist,
Subhashok Art Centre,
Bangkok, Scott Livesey
Galleries, Melbourne
and Edwina Corlette
Gallery, Brisbane



Talking to Srivilasa is like witnessing renewable energy. The practising Buddhist emits a childlike wonder, a stentorian laugh, and a yen for learning (“So many things I still want to do: get a mentor, learn how to make pasta, combine ceramics with aromatherapy, pursue Thai dancing.”) With a string of upcoming exhibitions, the prolific artist and avid collaborator has also established Clay LAB, a crowd-funded community studio in Melbourne’s Moorabbin that will encourage mentoring avenues between Eastern and Western artists. Boasting a social media following of nearly 13,000, he often uses the community to broadcast project ideas, and in 2013 sent a Facebook call-out for people around the world to mail him their blue or white coloured man-made rubbish. He then converted items such as broken toys, plastic bottles, and paper clips into *Coral Project*, a series of small sculptures, which illustrate the fact that corals now share ocean space with human trash.

Srivilasa explored eco-disruption again in *Trust Me II* (2014), a statuette fashioned to represent the rabbits that multiplied after they were introduced to Australia post-settlement. Elsewhere, *Red-Eared Slider*, his recent exhibition in Bangkok, tells the tale of the red-eared slider turtles native to the United States and introduced to Thailand as pets. After being released by their owners (“who realised they grew into monsters”) these invaders threatened the natural chain by outcompeting native species.

“Rabbits and turtles are cute, they make great pets for children,” Srivilasa offers. “But they can also disturb the landscape. So there’s this duality between good versus bad, and it feels the same with how we treat refugees. I moved from Thailand to Australia as a refugee, so I wanted to find a metaphor for this.”

“Vipoo’s works are strikingly beautiful,” his gallerist Edwina Corlette tells me when I visit her gallery to view his stockroom works. “Under closer inspection, they also yield a subtle narrative around the impact of various species of pests, and the damage they cause to our environment.”

For his 2017 show with Corlette, he hopes to expand an earlier series, *S&M Mermaids*, which delves into the polarity between sexual liberation and cultural constraints through nipple-pierced, bondage-strapped dominatrices and puckered-up beauty-pageant mermaids. Srivilasa explains that homosexuality is still viewed as taboo in Thailand, “so to experience the Mardi Gras in Australia was a liberating moment for me. It gave me the freedom to do fabulous things despite being strapped down by taboo. These mermaids are my alter-ego, they represent my two cultures.”



Last year, major art collector Subhashok Angsuvarnsiri, who has collected Srivilasa’s work since his first show in Bangkok in 2005, invited the artist to his Thailand home to peruse his mammoth display of art and objects. There, Srivilasa became drawn to an antique painting’s wooden frame, which bore the intricately carved flower patterns common to religious paintings. His October show at Scott Livesey Galleries, *Deities*, will feature works and arrangements inspired by Angsuvarnsiri’s acquisitions.

Recently, the artist also examined the fandom associated with Australia’s national pastime – sports – by interviewing collectors of memorabilia. Their anecdotes formed the base for his game-faced, team-clad *Fan* series for the Basil Sellers Art Prize 2016, showing at The Ian Potter Museum of Art until October.

They say in the sports world that winning isn’t everything – it’s the *only* thing. And there might have been a time, early in his career, when this might have rung true. “One day, I was sad because my work didn’t make the final selection for a major exhibition at a prestigious art museum,” Srivilasa admits. “Then my partner said to me, ‘You don’t have to be the best to be happy.’” The 46-year-old artist started connecting the dots. “After I heard him say this, I immediately changed my view on success. Now I try not to compare myself to other artists as long as I’m able to make a living through art.” **V**

Vipoo Srivilasa will show at Scott Livesey Galleries from 24 September to 15 October 2016 and at Edwina Corlette Gallery in May 2017.

Vipoo Srivilasa is represented by Edwina Corlette Gallery, Brisbane, Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne, Adrian Sassoon, London and Ferrin Contemporary, Massachusetts.

Vipoo.com
edwinacorlette.com
scottliveseygalleries.com